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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 000137

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [CVIS](#) [KVIR](#) [PHUM](#) [AF](#) [LO](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR OBSITNIK'S MARCH 27 LUNCHEON WITH PRIME
MINISTER FICO

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik, for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (U) This message contains an action request; please see
para 7.

2.(C) Summary: In a cordial and collegial, hour-long conversation (entirely in Slovak) over lunch, Ambassador Obsitnik and Prime Minister Fico discussed domestic politics, VWP, the NATO Summit and Afghanistan, Kosovo, Iraq, the draft Slovak media law and energy. (Comment: The lunch was unexpectedly rushed because PM Fico had to make a courtroom appearance in the libel suit brought against him by former Finance Minister Ivan Miklos. End Comment) PM Fico said that Slovakia would "be helping in a greater way" by boosting its contributions in Afghanistan and would make a positive statement on this in Bucharest, and Slovakia would not be the last to recognize Kosovo. He expressed support for extending NATO membership to the A-3 and MAP to Ukraine and Georgia. Fico thanked the Ambassador for U.S. efforts to move forward rapidly on VWP and sought information and USG support regarding a request he received from the Iraqi Government to host in Slovakia a meeting of all Iraqi political parties. The Prime Minister also assured the Ambassador that further changes would be made to the draft Slovak media law so that it would not be perceived as "anti-democratic." The two agreed to continue a discussion regarding energy cooperation at a future date. End Summary.

Domestic Politics

13. (C) The Ambassador commended PM Fico on his sustained popularity and high approval ratings, observing that the practice of holding government sessions in various regions of the country was a good tool for reaching a broader audience. Fico emphasized that he had to "expend a lot of personal time managing Meciar and Slota," but there were much more serious problems among the opposition. With a strong economy, entry into Schengen, and the Euro and VWP on the horizon, the opposition has difficulty finding valid issues that resonate with the public, Fico said.

VWP

14. (C) PM Fico thanked the Ambassador for our assistance in concluding the VWP MOU so expeditiously. In response to

criticism from some EU partners for having moved ahead with the MOU, Fico had argued that it was "only right that the new EU countries had the same privilege" as other members. Fico asked about prospects for Slovak accession to VWP this year. He also wanted to know whether the President had the sole authority to move the process to a close once Slovakia had met all the necessary criteria, and what had motivated his strong stance in favor of VWP expansion. Ambassador Obsitnik explained that there were additional steps and requirements, including the conclusion of an HSPD-6 agreement and an implementing agreement; upcoming site visits and a visa refusal rate under 10 percent for FY 2007. He stressed that President Bush's strong advocacy of an expanded VWP stemmed not from any political pressure, but from a belief that it was the right thing to do.

NATO Summit/Afghanistan

15. (C) PM Fico confirmed that "Slovakia would be helping in a greater way" in Afghanistan and that President Gasparovic "would be in a position to make positive statements and commitments in Bucharest." The Prime Minister stated that he would like to make another visit to Afghanistan and "agrees that we all have to support the NATO mission." Afghanistan has seen tremendous progress on the civilian side, he added. Fico also confirmed that the Slovaks would be increasing their cooperation with the Dutch in Afghanistan but that this news "had to be made public gradually." Ambassador Obsitnik observed that one of the key deliverables at Bucharest would be a new, comprehensive approach to Afghanistan that would foster better civ-mil cooperation. (Note: FM Kubis, s Chief de Cabinet added to us March 28 that Slovakia wanted to react

positively to NATO requests for further participation in OMLTs, citing possible cooperation with the Canadians that might be mentioned in Bucharest, in addition to troop contributions to the Dutch-led operations in Uruzgan.)

16. (C) With respect to enlargement, Fico told the Ambassador that Slovakia supports the accession of all three aspirant countries: Albania, Croatia and Macedonia. The GOS also supports MAP now for Georgia and Ukraine. Fico added that although the political situation and stability of the government in Ukraine were quite precarious, it is an important country, which, like the other candidates, would benefit from NATO membership just as Slovakia has. The Ambassador noted that President Putin would attend the Summit for the first time since the NATO-Russia Council was founded, and shared a brief readout of the recent 2 2 talks. Fico said he was aware that President Bush planned to visit Sochi following the Summit.

Iraq

17. (C) Fico told the Ambassador that he had been approached about a week ago by "the Iraqi government" about the possibility of hosting a conference of Iraqi political parties outside of Iraq. Fico said he had been told that there would be an estimated 200 people at the conference and that he had offered the GOI the use of the government's conference facilities in the town of Smolenice, not far from Bratislava. PM Fico said that he thought Slovakia had been approached because it was perceived as "impartial," and that two other countries were also being considered. Prime Minister Fico asked for any additional information we might provide regarding this potential conference and implicitly sought our support for Slovakia as the venue. (Action Request: Post would appreciate any insights that Embassy Baghdad or NEA/I could provide regarding this proposal, as well as Department's views on potential U.S. support for holding it in Slovakia. End Request.)

Kosovo

¶8. (C) PM Fico told the Ambassador that on Kosovo, Slovakia would not be the last one at "barricades," and that he knew the eyes of Europe were on Slovakia. (Note: meaning Slovakia would not be the last EU member to recognize Kosovo. End note.) Fico said he is waiting for the right moment for recognition. The Ambassador pointed out that 21 EU countries had already recognized or were in the process of doing so and that it would not be good for Slovakia or its people if he waited too long. Fico agreed, but cited as reasons for delay the strong connection between the Slovak and Serbian people and a concern that recognition could give momentum to a movement for Hungarian autonomy. Fico cited key points in history in which the West had not intervened to protect the sovereignty of Central European states (1938, 1968). The Ambassador responded firmly that Europe in 2008 was not analogous to that of 1938 or 1968 and that the U.S. would deem attempts to question the inviolability of a NATO Ally's borders unacceptable. The Ambassador underscored the progress the Kosovars were making in implementing the Ahtisaari plan, as well as the fact that the Kosovars had not provoked or participated in any of the violent incidents that have occurred. Fico said the GOS would wait to see how things played out, and offered that he thought that Bosnia might end up being an "even bigger problem."

Media Law

¶9. (C) Aware of our strong concerns over the draft media law, PM Fico noted that some changes had already been made to the draft, e.g., deletion of a provision that would have given the Ministry of Culture authority to determine violations and levy fines against publishers, in response to our concerns and those of the OSCE and others. Fico assured the Ambassador that additional changes would be made so that the law conformed to international standards: "don't worry, we'll get it done," he said. One change that would be made, he

explained, would be to limit access to the "right of response" to individuals. (Comment: although Fico said the government and parliament would not be able to use the "right of the response," we do not see the distinction as significant, since individual members of the government and the parliament could avail themselves of the provision. End comment.)

¶10. (C) In response to the Ambassador's invocation of OSCE standards, Fico replied that the draft media law didn't violate anything. However, Slovakia does not want to be seen as adopting anti-democratic laws or regulations. On the other hand, Fico said he did not want to be seen as buckling under to the opposition, which had wrongly tied the law to passage of the Lisbon Treaty. Referring to OSCE's Representative for Media Freedom, Miklos Haraszti, Fico added that Slovakia should not change its approach on account of the concerns of "a bureaucrat." Repeating a previously expressed canard, Fico sought to diminish the authority of Haraszti's criticism by saying that they were not from the "full OSCE," but rather from a functionary. Fico complained that "Slovak journalists have no code of ethics" and they are inadequately trained. He cited one high-profile writer who he claimed had only a secondary school education. (Comment: We agree that the Slovak media are not sufficiently professional or well-trained, but the draft law is hardly a solution to this problem. Post is bringing a media expert to Slovakia to conduct training and has allocated grant funding to help bolster investigative training techniques among young journalists. End Comment.)

Energy

¶11. (C) At the conclusion of the meeting, the Ambassador mentioned U.S. interest in playing a role in promoting

greater energy independence in Slovakia, particularly in the realm of nuclear energy, where U.S. firms could be competitive. Fico agreed that Slovakia must work toward greater energy security and independence and expressed his interest in pursuing the discussion at a later date.

OBSITNIK